DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 320 CG 021 896

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TITLE Judgments of Sexism on the Job: An Attributional Model.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (61st, Chicago, IL, May 4-6, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; Attribution Theory; Case Studies; College Students; Employed Women; *Employer Employee Relationship; Higher Education; *Morale; *Promotion (Occupational); *Sex Bias; *Sex Discrimination; Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Perceptions of supervisor bias can profoundly affect organizational climate and employees' morale. Based on attribution theory, it was predicted that bias would be used to explain denial of promotion when the employee had been expected to succeed. It was also predicted that social comparison information detailing the similar plight of peer women or the good fortune of peer men would enhance attributions of sexism. College students (N=60) read the career histories of women who had been denied promotion by their male bosses. Expectations of success were manipulated by presenting information that indicated level of ability and quality of the employee's past performance. Participants explained the denial of promotion by rating the employee's ability and effort, the difficulty of her job, and the supervisor's sexism and incompetence. Results supported predictions. Magnitude of attributed sexism was greater when the employee was described as having both high ability and an excellent record of past performance. Both information concerning the similar plight of peer women and the good fortune of peer men increased the magnitude of attributed sexism. Further support for an attributional model of bias was obtained from ratings of employees' effort and job difficulty. Limitations of the generality of the findings are discussed, and references are include, along with three data analysis graphs. (Author/TE)

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ED310320

Presented at Midwestern Psychological Association
Chicago, May 1989

Judgments of Sexism on the Job: An Attributional Model

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Abstract

Perceptions of supervisor bias can profoundly affect organizational climate and employee morale. Based on Attribution Theory (Deaux, 1976), it was predicted that bias would be used to explain denial of promotion when the employee had been expected to succeed. It was also predicted that social comparison information detailing the similar plight of peer women or the good fortune of peer men would enhance attributions of sexism. Sixty college students read the career histories of women who had been denied promotion by their male bosses. Expectations of success were manipulated by presenting information indicative of level of ability and quality of the employee's past performance. Participants explained the denial of promotion by rating the employee's ability and effort, the difficulty of her job, and the supervisor's sexism and incompetence. Results supported predictions. Magnitude of attributed sexism was greater when the employee was described as having both high ability and an excellent record of past performance ($p=.033$). Both information concerning the similar plight of peer women and the good fortune of peer men increased the magnitude of attributed sexism ($p<.001$). Further support for an attributional model of bias was obtained from ratings of employee effort and job difficulty. Limitations of the generality of the findings are discussed.

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Introduction

Deciding that bias contributed significantly to an individual's successful or failed professional outcome is a socially meaningful event with potential legal ramifications. Within an organizational setting, employees may spend much time analyzing the causes of co-workers' successes and failures. Perceptions of bias can have profound effects on organizational climate and employee morale. While considerable attention has been devoted to the effects of bias on individuals and groups and on an examination of why humans engage in biased behavior, little is known about the variables influencing perceptions and attributions of bias.

Determination of whether or not an individual has been the object of biased treatment involves human judgment. Perception of bias may be correct or erroneous. The observer may correctly note the presence or absence of bias. Bias may also be reported erroneously (false alarm) or mistakenly overlooked (incorrect rejection). Theoretically, detection of bias consists of two stages. Biased attitudes must first be attributed to the interactant with influence power (a dispositional attribution). Secondly, the attributed attitudes must be causally linked to another interactant's outcomes (an external attribution; Harvey & Weary, 1985).

Perceptions of bias are most likely to arise in situations of social injustice. Social injustice can be defined as a mismatch between an individual's inputs (e.g., ability, effort) and the resulting successful or failed outcomes. Social injustice may also result when the individual is treated differently from comparable others. Because the workplace is considered a meritocracy, violations of social justice are relatively unexpected. Unexpected outcomes are typically attributed to external causes (e.g., Deaux, 1976). Bias may be defined as an external attribution relative to the individual striving towards goal achievement.

Bias may be attributed to explain an undeserved reward or an unfair punishment. When attributed to explain undeserved rewards or successes, bias takes the form of a facilitatory influence (e.g., Mary Smith is promoted to a top executive position despite her dull intellect, disastrous record, and total lack of commitment to her profession). When attributed to explain an undeserved punishment or failure, bias takes the form of a hindrance (e.g., Mary Smith is passed over for a top executive position despite her brilliant intellect, impeccable record, and total devotion to her profession).

Table 1: Types of Bias

	Actual Outcome	
Expected Outcome	Success	Failure
Success	unknown	hindrance bias
Failure	facilitation bias	unknown

The present investigation examined hindrance bias. Participants read the career histories of women who had experienced failure through denial of promotion. Expectancies of success vs. failure for the female characters were manipulated by providing participants with information regarding ability and past performance. It was predicted that both high ability and excellent past performance information would result in greater probability of attributing sexism.

Participants were also provided with social comparison information. That is, they were told about the degree of professional success of the character's co-workers. Two dimensions were manipulated: the similarity of comparison peers (similar: same gender; dissimilar: opposite gender), and the similarity of the peers' fate (similar plight vs. good fortune). It was predicted that either information regarding the similar plight of peer women or the good fortune of peer men would lead to greater probability of attributing sexism. In both cases, the social comparison information serves to increase the saliency of the stimulus dimension of gender.

Method

Subjects/Procedure

Sixty male and female college students participated in an experiment on "perceptions of situations in an organizational work setting" for course credit. Instructions stated that participants would be reading scenarios, based on real-life situations, which had been edited to achieve uniformity in length, order, and type of information. Each one-page scenario presented a situation in which a female employee was denied promotion by her male supervisor. The participants' task was to judge what factors contributed to this event. Subjects were given booklets containing descriptions of six scenarios and response rating scales. Following completion of the booklets, participants were debriefed and dismissed.

Materials and Design

Participants read and rated six scenarios describing the educational backgrounds and employment histories of six female employees, each working for a different fictitious company. The six scenarios represented within-subjects factorial combinations of two variables: Past Performance (poor, no information control, excellent) and Ability Information (low, high). Past performance was defined according to the degree of success experienced in two previous jobs, as evidenced by performance evaluations, bonuses, and promotions. Ability was manipulated by either stating that the character had graduated from a prestigious business school (e.g., Harvard) with an MBA degree and a GPA close to 4.0, or describing the character's educational history as consisting of one year of community college with a close to 2.0 GPA. Scenario order was counterbalanced by using two replications of a 6X6 Latin Square.

The between-subjects variable, Social Comparison Information, was manipulated through five different types of scenarios (similar plight/peer women, good fortune/peer men, no information control, similar plight/peer men, good fortune/peer women). For example, in the similar plight/peer women condition, participants learned that two of the main character's female co-workers also had problems with their professional advancement, and that they had both experienced lack of rewards; and little verbal acknowledgement, feedback, or communication from the same supervisor. On the other hand in the good fortune/peer men condition, participants read that two male co-workers had no problems with their professional advancement. In fact, these men had received a great deal of communication and support from the same supervisor.

Participants rated the following causal dimensions: ability, effort, likability, difficulty level of job, sexism of boss, and competence of boss. Each dimension was rated on two seven-point Likert scales: one evaluating the value of the dimension (e.g., not at all sexist - highly sexist), and the other evaluating the contribution of that dimension to the denial of promotion (not at all influential - highly influential).

Results

Ability Ratings

Data were analyzed using 2x5x3x2 ANOVA. Ratings of the character's ability yielded a significant main effect for the Ability manipulation ($F(1,50)=123.72$, $p<.001$). Ability ratings were higher under the high ability (5.72) than under the low ability (3.93) conditions.

Ability ratings were also impacted by the Past Performance manipulation ($F(2,100)=40.53$, $p<.001$). Highest ratings were obtained in the excellent performance condition, lowest were obtained in the poor performance condition, with the control condition falling in between (5.42, 4.92, 4.14).

The character's ability was perceived as having contributed more to her denial of promotion under low (3.83) than under high ability (2.92) conditions ($F(1,50)=92.88$, $p<.001$). Her level of ability was seen as most influential under conditions of poor past performance, and least influential under excellent performance, with the control condition falling in the middle (4.0, 3.45, 2.67; $F(2,100)=28.92$, $p<.001$). It is obvious that the Ability manipulation was successful, and that participants inferred ability from the character's past performance.

Supervisor's Sexism

A main effect was obtained on ratings of sexism for Social Comparison Information ($F(4,50)=8.62$, $p<.001$). As can be seen in Figure 1, both information regarding the similar plight of peer women and the good fortune of peer men increased the magnitude of attributed sexism over all three remaining conditions (Newman-Keuls test, $p<.05$) which did not differ reliably from each other ($p>.05$). A significant interaction for Performance and Ability was also obtained ($F(2,100)=3.5$, $p=.033$). As can be seen in Figure 2, the highest level of sexism was attributed when the stimulus woman was described as having both high ability and an excellent record of past performance. Ability information was most influential when information about performance was lacking. Essentially mirror-image results to the finding for level of sexism were obtained for participants' ratings of the contribution of the supervisor's sexism to the character's denial of promotion.

Supervisor's Competence

Main effects of both Ability ($F(1,50)=14.41$, $p<.001$) and Past Performance ($F(2,100)=15.7$, $p<.001$) were obtained on ratings of level of supervisor's competence. The supervisor was judged as less competent when denying promotion to the character of high ability (3.24) than low ability (3.65). He was also judged as least competent when denying promotion to the character

with excellent past performance (3.09), as compared to poor performance (3.73), and the no information control condition (3.43).

A significant interaction between Ability and Past Performance was obtained for contribution of boss's incompetence to the denial of promotion ($F(2,100)=4.06$, $p=.02$). As can be seen in Figure 3, the lines for high ability and low ability are parallel under the control and excellent performance conditions. The contribution of the competency dimension is greater when ability is high and when past performance was excellent. There is a reversal under poor past performance conditions. This is probably due to the question of why a person of both low ability and poor past performance had been hired in the first place.

Discussion

The present investigation examined informational predictors of causal attributions of sexism. It was hypothesized that information indicative of both excellent past performance and high ability would increase the likelihood of attributing sexism as a cause of promotion denial. Both excellent prior performance and high ability have the effect of creating an expectancy for success. Therefore when explaining an unexpected failure, the observer should search for external causes. One of these consists of sexist bias.

Further confirmation for this attributional model comes from job difficulty ratings. Participants judged the character's job as more difficult when provided with information indicative of high ability level (main effect for Ability, $p<.001$) and excellent past performance (main effect for Past Performance, $p<.001$). On the other hand, participants did not see an internal cause, effort, as contributing to denial of promotion. Participants judged the character's effort in her current job as higher both when provided with information indicative of high ability (main effect for Ability, $p<.001$) and excellent past performance (main effect for Past Performance, $p<.001$). If effort were perceived as causing denial of promotion in the situation of high expectancy for success, then effort would have had to have been judged as low.

Attribution of sexism as hindrance bias is dependent on the salience of gender as a dimension. Many situational and personal stimulus characteristics are good candidates for explaining denial of promotion. For instance, a supervisor may dislike an employee and therefore deny the employee promotion. Alternately, organizational norms (e.g., employment duration required for promotion) and dynamics (e.g., positions currently available within the organization) may prohibit an employee's promotion. The availability of social comparison information indicating the similar plight of peer women or the good

fortune of peer men pinpoints gender as a salient dimension, and makes other explanations for promotion denial less probable.

Future research would need to address the generality of our findings. For example, would similar relationships among variables be obtained with facilitation instead of hindrance bias? What is the impact of varying the gender of the employee and supervisor? One firm conclusion that can be drawn is that attribution theory is an excellent tool for the study of perceptions of bias in the workplace.

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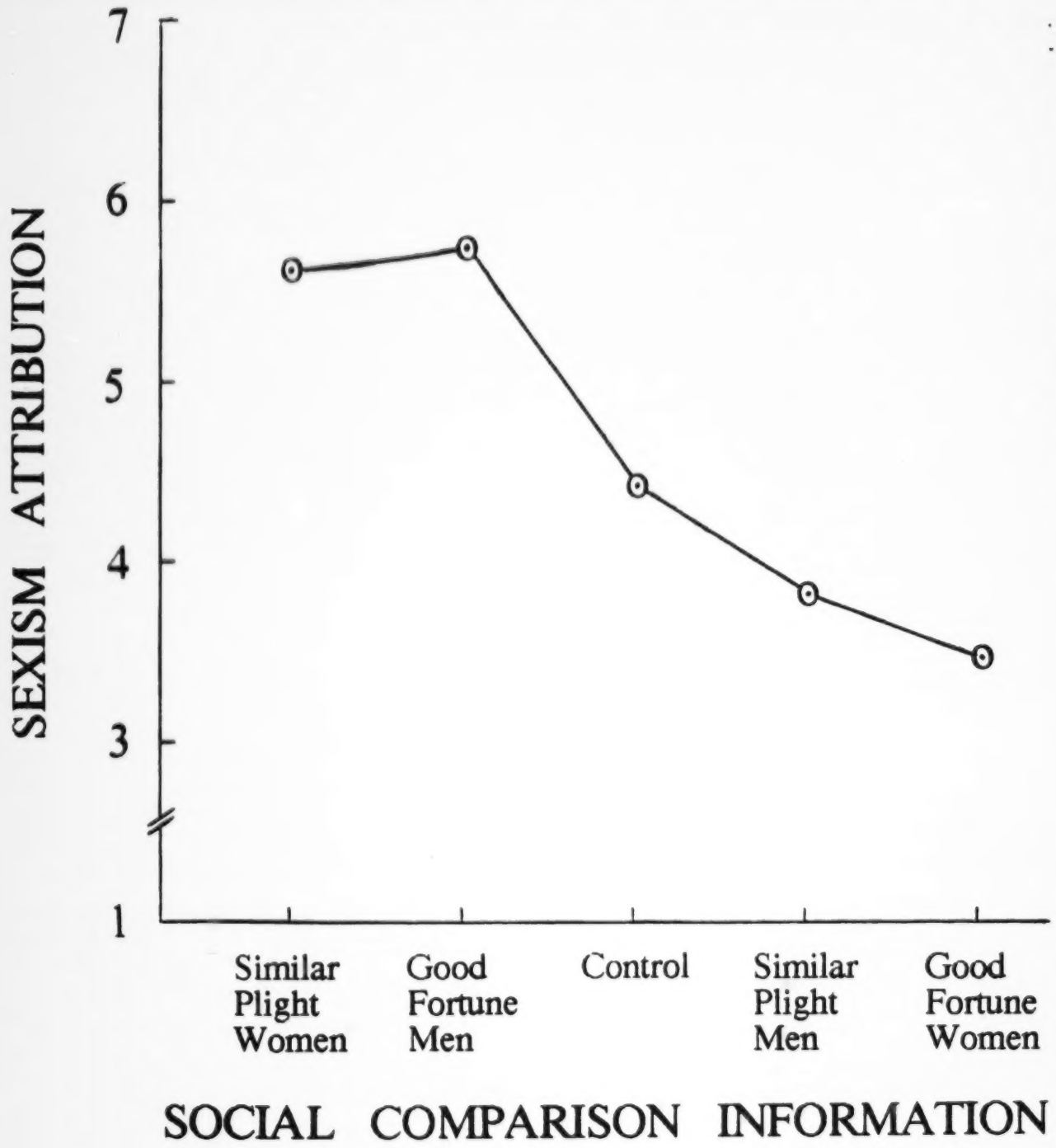

Figure 1: Main Effect of Social Comparison Information on Attributions of Sexism ($p<.001$).

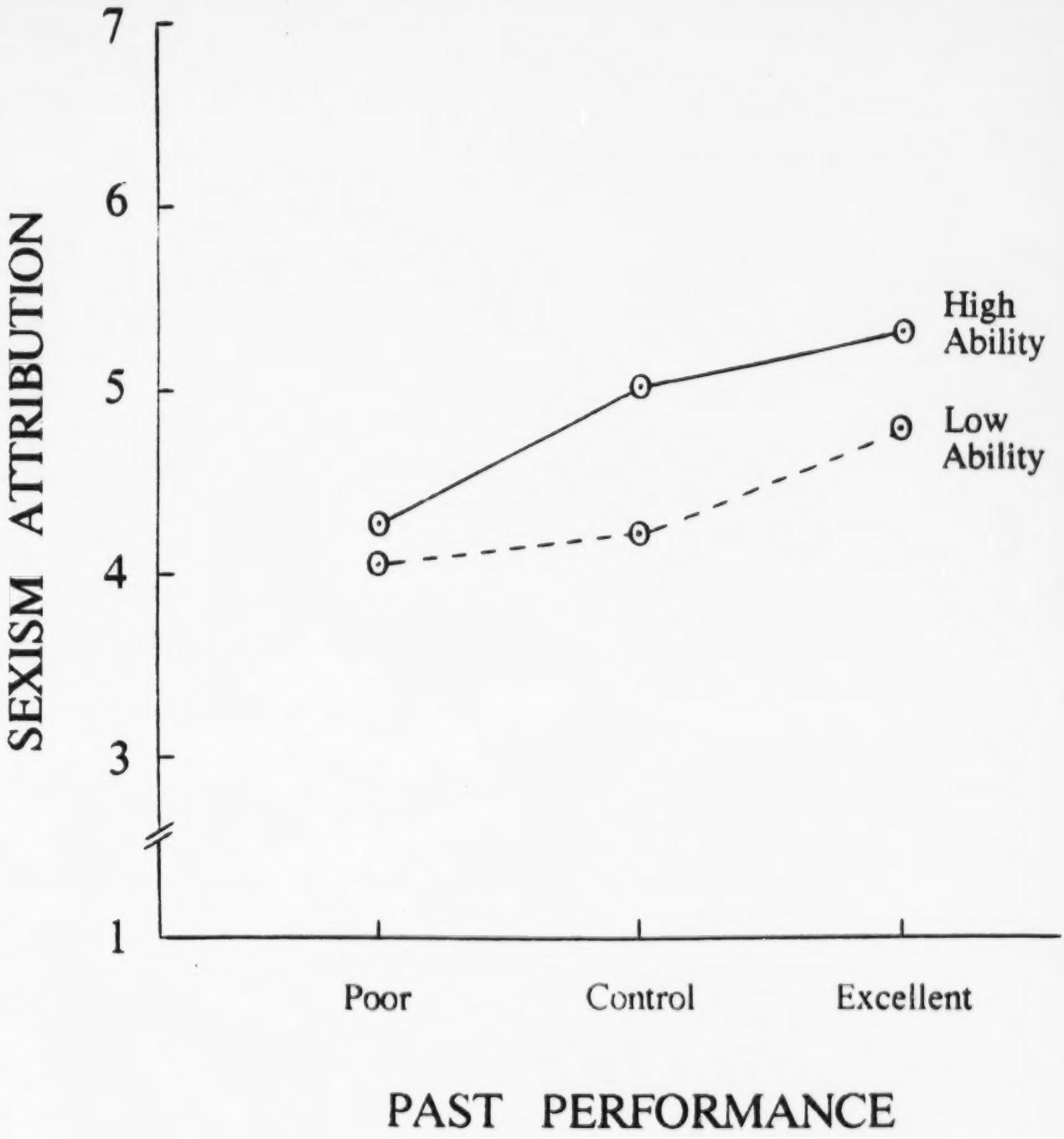

Figure 2: Interaction of Past Performance and Ability Information on Attributions of Sexism (p=.033).

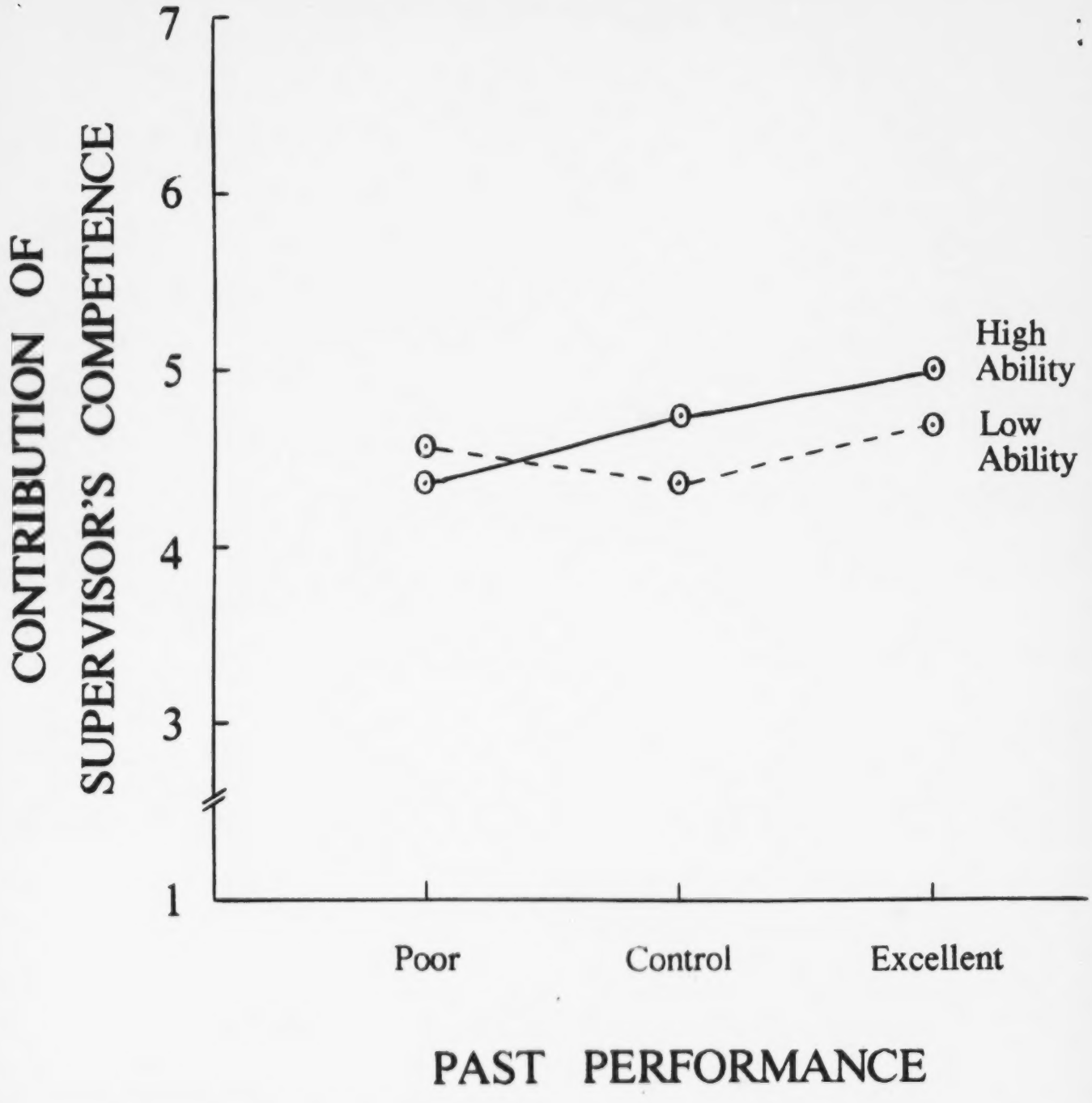

Figure 3: Interaction of Past Performance and Ability Information on Ratings of Contribution of Supervisor's Competence (p=.02).